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ABSTRACT

Democracies of both the East and the West function in a world depression that began 20 years ago and has grown uninterruptedly. Overlaying the economic crisis is the fact that the current economic powers, Germany, Japan, and Russia, are without military might; while the military power, the United States, has virtually no industrial base and an economy in deepening crisis. Fortunately, it has been in times of historical crisis that people interested in democracy and social justice have made the greatest gains, even if their interests were at the same time under the gravest threats. Other nations look to the United States for hints about the relationship of democracy and literacy. The Brazilian, Paulo Freire, is frequently invoked by proponents of democracy, but he is sadly iconicized and reified. Freire's system of thought may be broken down into binaries of social democracy and doctrinal Marxism or, alternatively, idealism and mechanical materialism. However, both of these systems are flawed and neither will lead the people in today's world to true democracy or equality. Where Freire goes wrong is to fail to recognize the importance of his own call for the critical role of ideology, that is, the role of ideas as a material force, especially the idea of equality. The focus in Freire relies heavily on the theory of productive forces, both in the idealist Freire and the doctrinal Freire--a focus that overestimates the technique of production above the social relations of production. The untenable binary of national economic development and democracy might be resolved by uniting them under the rubric of the moral imperative of equality--in both the mode (decision-making) and means (equality in distribution) of production. (TB)

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Paulo Freire and the Contradictions of Literate Democracy

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I recently returned from a research trip to Grenada where I met with the Minister of Education, installed after the 1983 U.S. invasion, and the leaders of the former New Jewel Movement of Grenada, now in an 18th century prison--sentenced to life. Both the Minister of Education and the NJM leaders are conducting literacy classes, the former all over the island and the latter in jail. Both the Minister and the NJM prisoners asked me about developments in the U.S. which would help them build an ethic of democracy through literacy education. The irony of their positions and the question they asked drove home to me the notion that literacy has potential as a domesticating tool, and as a force for liberation. Indeed, in many cases, literacy and democracy have little in common. It is interesting, actually somewhat puzzling to me, that other nations might look to the United States for hints about the relationship of democracy and literacy when, on the one hand, the US suffers from an illiteracy rate of about 25%, massive constant color-coded unemployment, the collapse of its social service safety net, an all-out assault on the conditions of work among those who still have jobs, a representative government that can only elect millionaires, and a

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form of literacy that elevates the geneticist arguments of the Bell Curve to the focal point of public discourse. In contrast, it seems to me that the underground movements of Eastern Europe over the last decade, and the people's movement in Grenada, as diverse as they may have been, could be an illuminating practical ground for North Americans interested in linking literacy with democratic projects.

How democratic possibilities might be achieved depends on an assessment of current conditions. In very brief, I believe, East and West, we function in a world depression which began about twenty years ago and has grown uninterruptedly. Overlaying the economic crisis is the fact that the current economic powers, Germany, Japan, the USSR, are without military might; while the military power, the US, has virtually no industrial base and an economy in deepening crisis. This imbalance cannot long linger. I think, there is no place that the goal of those in power is truly to create a thinking, active work force. Instead, all poor and working people, including teachers, are segregated by race and class, degraded and deskilled while they are beguiled with stories of their own empowerment--a fairly sophisticated way to turn people into more willing instruments of their own oppression. Though the economic and political crisis is especially acute in the Southern Hemisphere, it remains that throughout the world we witness intense calls on the part of the privileged for the national unity of government, corporations,

and the organizations of working people--an appeal to all-class unity which has ominous relations to similar corporatist projects in the late twenties and thirties, that is, organized social decay. Nevertheless, it has been in times of historical crisis, as the one I think we are now entering, that people interested in democracy and social justice have made the greatest gains---the thirties in the US for example when people won the now-evaporating eight hour day, the right to form unions and bargain, and social security laws.

Even so, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc has underscored the crisis of resistance. While today's world democratic movements have fought back and struggled for social justice in electoral arenas--and often won, it remains that those movements have changed little or nothing of essence. We now face a situation where it is clear that an economic and political system whose bellwether (the US) jails 1 in 250 of its citizens does not work especially well, yet the alternative has not worked either. It is in this context that many educators and agents for change--as well as those who want to construct hegemony in new ways--turn to Paulo Freire, the most famous radical educator in the western world, who I hope to problematize today.

Freire invites educators to mix an intriguing 4-part formula of literacy/critical consciousness/national economic development/ and revolution to create a new democracy in the midst of decline.

This formula runs into the fact that Freire is a paradigm shifter, more complex than many of those who would appropriate his work. I also suggest Freire is iconicized, reified. Critics attack him only from textual references while his complexity and internal contradictions are ignored, and his own counsel, to develop a fully critical outlook for social change rooted in the examination of social practice, denied. So, at once, Freire is artful in his application of models to social analysis; yet Freire is sometimes applied by as a template upon reality by those who he actually urges to be crafty.

My view is, I hope, neither so static nor so idiosyncratic. My thoughts are based on my view of dialectical materialism in the tradition of Georg Lukacs, a paradigm which Freire himself more or less adopts. However, Christianity and Hegelianism are Freire's theoretical base, the sources of his idealism, yet also the foundations for Freire's reverence for equality and the importance of leadership and ideology. For Freire, then the material world is subordinate to, and plays itself out in, the world of ideas and religion. In Freire's framework, God would be interested in dialectical materialism.

I think this idealism leads Freire to an apparently impossible binary: literacy for liberatory consciousness and literacy for national economic development. In other words, Freire embodies a

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contradiction which believes that ideas change the world, or that national technological-economic development changes the world. This brittle binary, again, rises from the fact that Freire is an idealist, one who privileges consciousness over being and whose interest in dialectical materialism is subordinate to his beliefs in God and reason. Hence, an understanding of the infinite complexity of the real world can be reduced to a binary, as opposed to the multitude of interrelating contradictions that are available to the materialist view. While Freire recognizes a democratic and egalitarian utopian goal, he posits to paths which are in harsh opposition to each other. But reality is always more complex than our comprehension---more interpenetrating than the binaries we might conjure.

Freire's idealism on the one hand and mechanical materialism on the other--a contradiction among many Freire is willing to live with--allows his admirers to uncritically appropriate only parts of him, without addressing his complexity. Some adopt Freire's humanism and ignore his politics, other adopt his politics and abuse his humanism. Still, in Freire is also the sense that, as a subset to this framework, dialectical materialism, and within that the primacy of class struggle and social practice,. is a coherent way to comprehend and act on the world. His demands for a critique of praxis create the ground for examining his own ideas and others. Moreover, Freire's insistence on the importance of ideology and leadership to social change and education lays

the basis to explore the possibilities of ideology linked to material equality.

Let's look at a simplified approach to how this works. Remember, Freire embodies a contradiction, a unity of opposites in struggle. What I am about to pose is but a useful photo of what should be better seen as a complex film always in motion.

Paulo Freire, Paradigm Shifter

The Idealist Freire

1. All of history is a process of human events.
2. Culture and language are primary indicators of this process.
3. Hence, to grasp history, analyze culture and language...
4. through literacy achieved via cultural investigation and dialogue.
5. Leaders and teachers are motivated, and linked to the masses and students, by respect and love, which overcomes inequality.
6. Literacy classes are student centered, texts rise from student experience.
7. Inequality is examined as dehumanization, spiritual weariness, historical anesthesia, cultural invasion.
8. Change is achieved through new consciousness underscored by literacy and new approaches to language: education for freedom.
9. The state, government, is mediated terrain, a potential ally.
10. In political activity, pluralism, that is the Workers party of Brazil. National culture and development privileged.
11. False consciousness is defeated by critical analysis.
12. Alienation is defeated by deconstructing hegemony.
13. In theory: this is the Postmodernist Freire; sex/gender, race, class, nation, are simultaneously pivotal.
14. Racism is analyzed primarily as an ideological system.
15. Resistance or praxis is equated to literary deconstruction.
16. Inequality defeated by heightened consciousness.
ie., <u>Traditional Social Democracy</u>

Paulo Freire, Paradigm Shifter

The Mechanically Materialist Freire

1. All history is the history is the history of the struggle for production, then class struggle.
2. Production and technology are the primary indicators.
3. Hence, to transform reality analyze and achieve production...
4. through literacy won via directive and steered dialogue.
5. Teachers and leaders motivated love, and national economic development. Personality cults rise, ie, Bishop, Castro, etc.
6. Inequality is examined as exploitation/imperialism.
7. Change is achieved via revolution and a revolutionary party.
8. The state, government, is to be smashed, then appropriated.
9. False consciousness defeated by national commitment to revolutionary national economic/technological development.
10. Alienation defeated in praxis by revolution, then economic improvements. National development requires support for national bourgeoisie.
11. Centralism in politics, ie, New Jewel, Cuba, etc.
12. In theory: class is pivotal; race, sex/gender, nation secondary.
13. Racism analyzed as system of exploitation.
14. Resistance is guerrilla or revolutionary war.
15. Inequality defeated by technological change which creates abundance.

ie.,
Doctrinal Marxism

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In my mind, social democracy and doctrinal Marxism, which I have represented as idealism and mechanical materialism, are failed systems as seen in Allende's Chile or Bishop's Grenada, or the Soviet Union. The elements of Freire's contradictions, both of which rely heavily on the good will of intellectuals and the postponement of equality in exchange for abundance, won't get us to democracy or equality. Abundance alone will never lead to equality which I consider the bedrock to democracy. Consciousness alone will never lead to democracy. You simply cannot get there from here on either route. Where I think Freire goes wrong, for what it's worth, is to fail to recognize the importance of his own call for the critical role of ideology, that is, the role of ideas as a material force---especially the idea of equality. Just as literacy does not necessarily have anything to do with liberation or democracy, neither does development or abundance lead to democratic equality or social justice. The focus in Freire relies heavily on the theory of productive forces, both in the idealist Freire and the doctrinal Freire---a focus which overestimates the technique of production above the social relations of production. I would suggest we could resolve the untenable binary of national economic development and democracy by uniting them under the rubric of the moral imperative of equality---in both the mode (decision-making) and means (equality in distribution) of production. Still, his contributions around the pivotal nature of praxis as the testing ground for knowledge, the centrifugal role of leadership---and the importance of the

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unity of leaders and educators with the masses and students, alone, are worth the complex encounter that occurs when reading the Vagabond of the Obvious---Paulo Freire.

Nevertheless, what is clear at this historical moment, is the people of the world have never been as educated, as technologically and culturally advanced, as they are now. All of the history of oppression demonstrates that where there is oppression there is always resistance. Oppression is both ideological and material, Benetton and AK-47's. What lies behind language is not technique but power. That is, discourse analysis in the tradition of the idealist Freire, will not supply the social forces necessary to make change. Moreover, what drives production is not technology but social relations--again imbued with imbalances of power---a process which the doctrinal Freire undervalues. Within Freire's contribution about the importance of ideology is the hint that equality might merge the contradiction, not by overlapping idealism with materialism but simply with a new understanding rising from a mostly social, rather than mostly technological vision.

While educators, especially literacy educators, are being urged by elites to join them in the efforts of dominance to tamp down the democratic expectations of the mass of people, it remains that to do so is to ignore the old revolutionary adage that an injury to one only precedes an injury to all---that to join in

the organization of decay is to eventually organize one's own rot.

Even so, we must make problematic the intersections of power and inequality that may block our best laid plans. The key area of agreement, for example, of the U.S. installed Minister of Education in Grenada and the former revolutionary New Jewel leaders now in prison, was that education must serve national economic development. The implications of that decision are extraordinarily perplexing. As both sides of this struggle are intensely aware, ideas have consequences. So, what is at issue for literacy educators is to determine just where it is we want to go and how we hope to get there. That, I hope will provide a focus to some of our discussion now...